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Kenneth Millard

## Poe Ballantine and the Gothic Frontier

“To the best of intentions/  
And the worst of desires”

James McMurtry, “Gulf Road”.

Poe Ballantine is a contemporary American writer, born in Denver in 1955, raised in San Diego, and currently living in Chadron, Nebraska. He is the author of two novels, *God Clobbers Us All* (2004), and *The Decline of the Lawrence Welk Empire* (2006), a book of short stories *Things I Like About America* (2002), and a book of ‘Personal Essays’ called *501 Minutes to Christ* (2007). All of these works were originally published by Hawthorne Books of Portland, Oregon, and none has attracted any serious or sustained critical attention, although a couple have been republished by Old Street Press in London, and received good reviews. More recently, he has published a new book of short stories called *Guidelines for Mountain Lion Safety* (2015). This essay argues that Ballantine’s memoir, *Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere* (2013) provides an opportunity to examine closely Ballantine’s social criticism, and its engagement not only with contemporary circumstances (the narrative is based on the still unexplained suspicious death of a math professor at Chadron State College in 2006), but with broader historical legacies of national mythology. *Love and Terror* calls itself a ‘memoir’, but this straightforwardly non-fiction designation does not do justice to the subtleties of the work’s engagement with history, nor to its literacy and artful self-consciousness. In particular, *Love and Terror* is a significant contribution to ideas about the value and function of the gothic to understandings of contemporary western history and national mythology. Here, the book’s contribution lies especially in its conceptualizations of gothic history to offer an interpretation of the contemporary small-town west, and, simultaneously, a critique of that national mythology that posits the possibility of

the recovery of an original innocence, which, for example, Leslie Fiedler, in his book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, characterized as central to much canonical American literature.

For example, *Love and Terror* is composed of two principal narratives, the detective story of Steven Haataja's disappearance and death, and the account of domesticity in which Ballantine establishes a home with his wife and child. These narratives appear to be mutually exclusive, but they are closely complementary in important conceptual ways. This complementarity, of the monstrous and the domestic, of love and terror, is characteristic of ambivalence about the efficacy of America as an enlightenment project, and it has an established historical provenance. *Love and Terror* invites the critical reader to contemplate the issue of beginnings, not only in the contemporary detective story of the mystery of Steven's disappearance, but in antecedent ideological or historiographical narratives of the nation's origins, even as far back as the English Reformation.

As a place to start, Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) is often cited as the origin of gothic literature in the US. This novel, with its indebtedness to a true story of mass murder, its depiction of spontaneous combustion, acts of ventriloquy, and subtle use of an anxious first-person voice, is commonly identified by critics as the first novel in America to make creative use of European gothic conventions, and in so doing to dramatize the spectre of gothic history in the New World. It is a novel that asks: what is gothic history, and why is it especially pertinent to understanding the US? There is of course a gothic history in American literature that is antecedent to *Wieland*, in Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative for example (1682), or J. Hector Crevecoeur's *Letters From An American Farmer* (1782), where enlightenment narratives of progress and optimism are haunted by a dark counter-history that threatens to undo the rhetoric of freedom and egalitarianism on which the nation's exceptionalism was founded. In Crevecoeur, the grisly spectacle of the negro slave suspended

in a cage in a tree undermines the enthusiastic idealism of the earlier letters, and suggests that such idealism is only possible thanks to the violence of slavery: “I perceived a negro, suspended in the cage, and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds” (164). American literature is therefore, according to Leslie Fiedler, “a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (29), or more recently, according to Teresa Goddu, in the US “the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it” (10). This is an interpretation of history that lends itself to the language of psychoanalysis, because of course anything repressed must haunt the contemporary moment. But in fact, psychoanalysis is itself a late gothic story, that is to say an interpretation of the concept of historical haunting that is antecedent to psychoanalysis. Freud himself took his model of the haunted consciousness from gothic literature. Thus the issue of the origin might be traced back almost indefinitely.

These arguments show that the issue of origins is significant: where does the gothic begin, and what understanding of the legitimate beginning serves as the origin of history? Many interpretations of the gothic are themselves haunted by their own problems of where something designated “gothic” most legitimately begins, and this is especially relevant because the gothic clearly has its own issues with beginnings and historical antecedents: it is often defined as a sense of an historical origin that haunts the present moment. The problem of defining a beginning is also integral to most recent studies of the gothic. For example, Steven Bruhm argues that in striving to define the gothic, “images of the origin continually recede” (259), and David Punter believes that a proper definition of the gothic is so enigmatic that it “brings us face to face with an origin which is no origin” (1998, 1). Eric Savoy has written that “the sense of the past that pervades gothic literature does not encourage the writer

to explain origins in clear relation to end-points in a seamless linear narrative” (169). An origin is a defining moment that can determine the parameters of the historical account that it initiates, so what are the consequences of a history without an origin?

*Love and Terror* is a work that has its own issues with beginning. It opens in medias res with a “Prologue” announcing the discovery of the missing college professor Steven Haataja, but then pauses this narrative with the declaration “But let’s begin at the beginning” (18), as if to return to some vital antecedent point. The narrative then begins again, with a first chapter entitled “Last Stop” which provides an account of Ballantine’s arrival in Chadron, Nebraska, in 1994. But this fresh start lasts only a few chapters, and he soon departs for Mexico (36). The narrative then begins again at chapter 7, with “Chadron the second time”, and Ballantine’s arrival in Nebraska with his Mexican wife. The narrative does not return to the mysterious disappearance of Steven until chapter 19, “Haataja Disappears”. The moment with which the text began, on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2006, does not return until chapter 47, and in chapter 48 the text repeats exactly the scene from the Prologue in which Ballantine learns of the discovery of Steven’s body; here the text repeats almost word-for-word the language of the Prologue: “I was looking out the window when she called. A train carrying scraggly ponderosas was creaking slowly east. Jeanne told me in a thrilled hush that she’d just received word that Professor Haataja had been found bound and dead in a ditch” (207). This repetitive temporal structure is appropriate for a narrator who has had an intensely peripatetic lifestyle, one of repeated numerous symbolic deaths and resurrections. The text is very self-conscious about this process, Ballantine claiming “My life kept ending and then it would start again” (52), and characterizing himself as traveling the states “like an escaped electron in a particle smasher” (36), and “wandering around the country like a corpse looking for its own funeral” (86).

Yet this still leaves open important questions about the true narrative beginning of history and subjectivity which are not resolved by anything contained in the text of *Love and Terror*. Its declaration “Let’s begin at the beginning” is a false one, obfuscated by sleights of hand where no true beginning is characterized. The text returns to repeat its own textual origins verbatim, as its principal means of establishing a point of beginning, thus folding in on itself in order to give the appearance of constituting an origin while disguising the absence of one. Ostensibly we might argue that rather than an elucidation of the origin, the text provides a demonstration of the constitutive power of the text. But it is more accurate to argue that for *Love and Terror*, the constitutive power of the text functions as the true origin, or has become the true origin, in and of itself. What the text strives to establish in these structural and temporal shifts is to create a history of its own beginnings from the representation of repeated false starts. Thus the text creates a history founded on absence and loss, a history from the repudiations of history.

A similar self-consciousness about the anxieties of textual self-representation in the first-person is characteristic of the beginning of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huck Finn*. This novel starts with two brief texts: an “Explanatory”, and before that, with a “Notice”, both of which act as apparently authorial signals to the reader about how to interpret the ensuing text. When we come to the novel’s first chapter, the narrator informs us that his history cannot be properly understood unless we have already read an antecedent text: “You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*” (Twain 1). Any critical reader should be disconcerted to be told by this first-person voice that the narrator cannot be known without already having read an antecedent text. But *Tom Sawyer* is written in the third-person, and therefore by its very form gives an utterly different sense of the character called Huck. Further, the story of Huck’s adventures only proceeds on the assumption that he is already dead, having staged his own murder, and therefore has the

freedom to perform multiple roles and identities throughout his journey until he is miraculously resurrected at the end.

The comparison with *Huck Finn* dramatizes the fraught issue of where self-composition begins, and of what problems of history are attendant upon textual representations of subjectivity. Both texts are auto-generative, spinning textual selves out of deferrals to other texts as if antecedent textuality was the only authentic self that could be known, and that all textual subjectivity is by its nature predicated on knowledge of those other texts that determine it. For *Love and Terror*, the text's awareness of the difficulties of establishing a satisfactory moment of origin are closely related to the central narrative problem of finding an historical beginning to the mystery of Steven's disappearance (the challenge of detection being principally to trace events back to the definitive beginning) but, beyond that, Ballantine is often anxious about the status of true knowledge of any Chadron resident's history. Threats to the community consist partly of partial knowledge of historical provenance of the town's residents. *Love and Terror* is aware that no (personal) history can be understood without full and proper knowledge of an historical origin; the foundation of history depends on such knowledge, but it is often simply a fabrication of textual sources, contingent only upon the word. So the text begins with the prospect of its own dissolution, of both the self (disappearance, suicide) and of the community (apocalyptic fire), and the true or authentic beginning lies only in the characterization of an ending, that is to say, in a repudiation of history which is paradoxically the beginning of history. These issues of origins inform the whole narrative of *Love and Terror* in some subtle and interesting ways.

One opportunity to historicize the beginning of *Love and Terror* is afforded by reference to the story "How I Lost My Mind and Other Adventures", from Ballantine's story collection *Things I Like About America*, which depicts his arrival in Chadron. In both the Ballantine story and Huck's *Adventures*, the word "adventures" is an ironic gloss on sombre narratives

of figurative death. Ballantine leaves town because “Leaving town is a symbolic suicide”, and he drives away towards a new start somewhere further up the road: “I left at night, driving west, the direction of escape after disaster, the direction of decline and the setting sun” (Ballantine, *Things I Like*, 2002, 142). This moment of departure and historical abandonment is especially significant because the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Love and Terror* reproduces these words exactly, where they are followed by “I intended to kill myself ... In America we remake ourselves, though it rarely works out” (19). It is surely no coincidence (whether or not Ballantine is aware of it) that the attempted suicide takes place in a motel room in Scottsbluff, a small town in western Nebraska which was once a vitally important point in the Great Migration of the early 1840s. The location of Scottsbluff calls up the national history of western “pioneering” (and by implication the great migration not only of 1842 but of 1630 also), which was predicated on repudiations that refuse to go away, and which it is the role of the gothic to revive.

According to David Punter there is an aesthetic quality to gothic writing that expresses “a fracture, an imbalance, a ‘gap’ in the social self that would not go away” (1987, 26). Robert Miles has argued that “there is broad agreement that the gothic represents the subject in a state of deracination, rupture, disjunction, fragmentation” (3), and for Pattie Cowell the gothic is “a genre whose very form prohibits a secure framework for defining the self” (128). The condition of the self in *Love and Terror* is thoroughly determined by the necessary limitations of the first-person narrative perspective. While all memoirs must be narcissistic to some extent (the central focus on an account of subjectivity tending to intensify the anxieties of self-examination) in *Love and Terror* this process is compounded by the failure of authoritative discourses such as law and medicine to provide secure explanations, or even temporary comfort. The failure of enlightenment reason forces Ballantine back on his own resources, to construct a narrative that will serve as a document of keeping it together in the



face of some disturbing uncertainties. *Love and Terror* is thus an orphaned bildungsroman that needs to create its own parents and then **to** establish its autonomy by repudiating them as fictions. But as we know from Jay Gatsby, who “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (Fitzgerald 105), such fictions require an enormous faith in the quality of the performance. Where Gatsby repudiates his parents, in *Love and Terror* the difficulty of the historical origin is both liberating and terrifying: it facilitates a belief in the freedom of self-fashioning that Ballantine is eager to embrace, but it is simultaneously susceptible to forms of (gothic) transformation that might be fearful and dangerous, and end only in extinction.

There is also an important antecedent in Hawthorne’s Wakefield, whose origins are similarly inscrutable, and whose self-possession is predicated on disappearance. Wakefield gives evidence of himself by absenting himself, and his self-fashioning originates in the wilful repudiation of his own history. Here is another incarnation of R. W. B. Lewis’s “American Adam”, who presents himself as “happily bereft of ancestry” (5), but who, like Rip van Winkle before him, has simply attempted to refute history and family, perhaps for no better reason than American mythology permits it. As Arnold Weinstein argued, “The American more than most, dreams of being freed from his or her origin, so as to make his or her self and world in an endless process of generative activity” (137). In *Love and Terror*, making evidence of the self’s history by writing is a means to hold at bay the threat of extinction that Steven’s death symbolizes. The gothic fear in *Love and Terror* is similar to that of Wakefield, “that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever” (Hawthorne 158).

In the context of ideas about flight and evasion, of transformation and self-reinvention, the depiction of domesticity in *Love and Terror* is especially important. Domesticity is the place where Ballantine takes his stand to commit to history, to address directly the material circumstances of adulthood in ways that, for example, Rip van Winkle does not. The agents

of domesticity are traditionally women (this is true for both Huck and Rip), but in the contemporary west of *Love and Terror* this domestic responsibility falls to the man: Ballantine marries Cristina so that she can stay in the US and become a naturalized citizen, and although she clearly has a redemptive role, it is still beholden to him (apparently) to take control of the management of their domestic life and to establish the terms on which it might prosper. Here, the man is the agent of his own domestication rather than the victim of the woman's home-making. Nevertheless, Cristina is the heart of the domestic narrative, the "stranger beside me" whose radical difference from Ballantine represents the text's most intimate struggle. Domesticity is the new frontier on the howling plains of nowhere, and its antagonisms at home are equal to the hostility lurking outside in the figurative wilderness. The text's casual allusions to Ann Rule's book *The Stranger Beside Me* are provocative, because they collapse the distinction between the monstrous out there (in Rule's case, the serial killer Ted Bundy) and its intimate proximity to the text's narrator 'at home'.

Ballantine's home life is evidence of a purposeful existence; like writing, it is another form of work that helps to identify him as a worthy citizen. Cristina's alterity however is a constant source of conflict. Twenty years younger than Ballantine, and a Mexican who speaks little English, Cristina is herself coming of age in America. The two characters' differences from each other produce constant trouble and strife, and fights that result in "eerie islands full of sterile domestic silence" (98). These differences are often attributed to failures of communication. As a non-native speaker, Cristina cannot be expected to appreciate the subtleties of language and irony that Ballantine trades in, at one point asking uncompromisingly, "'Why do you write that crap?'" (109). Ballantine concedes several times that "all this has to do with language" (195). But knowing Cristina is also a problem of knowing her historical origins: she once suffered a serious head trauma in Mexico, and perhaps as a consequence (or perhaps simply from homesickness) she drifts away in reveries

to a place that Ballantine designates “Cristinaland”, a place that signals her emotional departure from him. In one important scene he speaks to her mother on the phone, in his faltering Spanish, to ask why she is so unhappy, and seeking a clue to historical knowledge of her character (228). On another occasion Ballantine watches a video of Cristina in Mexico and witnesses a version of her that he never sees in the US: “I also try to do more than my share of work around the house, all the cooking, most of the dishwashing, the principal care and entertainment of Tom, but I’m rarely able to induce the kind of mood I see now on the patio in the house where she was raised” (160). Despite his best determined efforts at making this house work, Ballantine can never reach back to those historical circumstances that permit Cristina to enjoy a natural and spontaneous happiness which originates in her childhood. This Cristina is simply another person, and one whose alterity lies in an historical origin that he can never know, despite the discourse of a progressive and enlightened reason, and a belief in work which fails him here as it does in other vital areas of enquiry.

Ostensibly then, it appears that the principal issue for Cristina is “she feared that she would lose her identity” (43), and the major challenge to domestic happiness remains “her struggle with the language and her fear of losing her identity” (109). Cristina’s loss, however, is Ballantine’s gain, because she contributes directly to his newfound homeliness; her cultural difference, and the forms of social critique that it brings, produce in him a defence of his national culture that makes him feel far less alienated than before: “I wasn’t crazy about America either, I told her, but I’d stopped holding it to an impossible standard” (135). This reconciliation is vital to Ballantine’s personal fulfilment as an American subject, and it is a restoration founded on the tacit knowledge of the forces of darkness that must be managed in order to sustain it. As he concedes towards the end, “Darkness holds title to half of creation” (291). In *Love and Terror* such darkness is dramatized in the gothic flipside of willed enlightenment self-improvement, that is to say, in the multiple references to disappearance.

Disappearance is the text's expression of loss, the personified other to the mythology of re-invention. Thus, Steven is the conceptual complement to something much closer to home than might at first appear; he is "the man who existed one minute and did not the next" (119). Steven, we are told, "was dead (or had transformed himself into a new person)" (161). Steven had "walked away either to start his life over somewhere in the west ... or to end his days in the most private and nameless way" (116). These quotations make a direct association between personal re-invention and death, because they recognize the extreme sense of loss that is the necessary corollary of a programme of self-improvement, and on which the domestic narrative of *Love and Terror* is based. There is a profound awareness here, and throughout the book, of a sense of original sin that no amount of concerted enlightenment investment can ameliorate.

*Love and Terror* thus offers a valuable engagement with Leslie Fiedler's criticism of the perpetual adolescence of American literature as the canonized depiction of "a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid "civilization", which is to say, the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility" (26). Ballantine's dedication to a narrative of domesticity serves as a concerted attempt to establish a material history, as "another try at growing up" (54), and a sustained faith in "the duty I had to the two in my care" (263). There is sometimes a fierce energy to Ballantine's belief in the redemptive potential of home and domesticity: "I wanted this, us, to work out. I was done with jumping ship. I'd stayed the course with writing and it was beginning to pay off. Now it was time to commit to flesh and blood ... I believed that ... everything would change" (97-8). This is a powerfully programmatic investment in a schedule of self-improvement, in us/US, the semantic repetition expressing a determination that is willed, even wilful. There is a faith in the project of futurity that is driven by anxieties about the past that cannot easily be assuaged. Yet

occasionally, in the midst of the domestic scene, we see the momentary awareness of its potential dissolution: “When I got home I put some fishsticks in a pan for Tom, poured him a glass of milk and thought of my sister and my son and what it would be like to have them disappear, to lose them without a trace” (134). Although Ballantine is clearly imagining himself as the victim of abandonment here rather than its perpetrator, the American locution “to have them disappear” is inhabited by the ambiguity of being the agent of their disappearance. Abandonment is regarded with terror, as the traumatic breaking of those familial bonds that make the new life worth living. But the fear of its occurrence is never entirely banished. One apparently gratuitous detail of Rhonda and Kevin’s relationship is significant here: ““Ever since we got here he’s just ... *different* ... you never really know a person ... do you?”” (285). The problem of another’s difference cannot be entirely overcome, at least by any means that can be understood in rational discourse, and this difference, according to *Love and Terror*, is because we cannot know others at their origin.

Beyond Rhonda’s question lie the spectres of Jonathan Coleman’s *Exit the Rainmaker* and Ann Rule’s *The Stranger Beside Me*, and beyond them stand Gatsby, Wakefield and Rip van Winkle, men who choose to absent themselves from their origins and thus demonstrate that we never really knew them to start with, that is to say, their authentic origins were not properly understood, their original subjectivity more volatile and contingent than was recognized. They are the products of a culture that mythologizes and even venerates personal transformation, and is correspondingly fascinated by its travesties. At Cristina’s naturalization ceremony Ballantine writes, “Cristina, baby, where are you now? Who are you now? My wife raised her hand and became an American” (255). The gothic antecedent here is Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, the subtitle of which is “The Transformation”, an allusion to the radical and frightening alteration of personality that Theodore appears to undergo before he becomes a murderer. In *Love and Terror*, Ballantine is committed to the concept of

transformation, but he is simultaneously fearful of what, as a principle, it might lead to. This is the gothic underside of a national mythology of personal liberation from the self, and it has an ancient theological pedigree.

The other key component of the domestic narrative is Ballantine's young son, Tom, who has been "red-flagged" as autistic (59). Ballantine struggles to understand Tom's autism, to diagnose and interpret his son's behavior, to address it through any scientific and rational means available. In this, he learns principally a scepticism about forms of rational and scientific discourse that are clearly at their limit to explain Tom's occasional "fierce spasmodic trance face" (93). Just as the enlightenment characters of *Wieland* are baffled and disturbed by phenomena such as ventriloquy and spontaneous combustion, here the narrative offers challenges to epistemology that rational discourse is unable to resolve. This suggests the failure of enlightenment to assuage anxieties about vitally important phenomena that remain challenging and disturbingly difficult. Ballantine concedes that "Tom was definitely different" (75), but how can such difference (in a five-year-old) be interpreted authoritatively? What is the origin of such difference? The same vital question is posed concerning Ballantine's earlier depressive condition: medication is ineffective because "symptoms were being treated, root causes were not being explored" (86). *Love and Terror* depicts the limits of the medical profession's ability to elucidate an origin, a root cause, because medicine, like the law that fails Steven, is a discourse that cannot be relied upon as a definitive source of knowledge, and because vital historical origins are not properly understood or examined.

Louis Gross has argued that "If there is one central area of fear that the Gothic novel exploits it is the fear of losing one's sense of self as a human being in relation to the family, the state, and God. Throughout the development of the Gothic narrative runs the primary fear of the monstrousness of singularity" (8). In *Love and Terror*, this fear is seen in the prospect

of Cristina turning into someone else, and in Ballantine's anxiety about her disappearing to Cristinoland. Ballantine is also fearful of Tom's disappearance: "He'd go into himself for long periods alone, oblivious as a cosmonaut to the outside world" (62). Although *Love and Terror* is primarily concerned with the reason for Steven's disappearance, and its historical provenance, the whole text is haunted by the terror of the disappearance of others:

"Whenever Tom withdrew, or went into one of his spaz-trances rattling a juniper bush or stroking the tassels on a couch cushion, I'd never let him go for long. Fixed in my mind was that archetypal image of autism: the rocking, drooling child who receded one day and never returned ... Cristina sometimes went away too, her eyes dazed blots as she floated mysteriously off like a wizard balloonist into Cristinoland" (291). These gothic images, of both pathologized wife and child absenting themselves from Ballantine's reach, are anxious reflections of his own former historical disappearances, and of Steven's disappearance and death. Ballantine is troubled by the knowledge of the self's potential transformations; his determined faith in a commitment to family life that makes him, as a citizen, visible, is simultaneously haunted by the potential for the self to absent itself. If the textual self of *Love and Terror* can create itself *ab initio*, then it might just as easily return there, and so it worries about others' disappearance as it writes itself into existence. Ballantine's fastidious determination to create a stable and secure home life is therefore a complement to his dedication to writing as work: both make him visibly present as an enlightened citizen of the community. The devotion to home and writing as work helps to keep at bay the spectre of the gothic history that is silenced in order to sustain it.

Tom's autistic "difference" is especially significant in this respect, partly because it has no discernible origin (except of course in the genetic makeup of his parents) and partly because it is consistently characterized as a source of creative imagination and interest. Tom has a way of looking at the world differently, and this makes him an imaginative commentator on

it, and a valuable creative contributor to the narrative interest of the text that becomes *Love and Terror*. The adult characters of the text warm to Tom, who “delighted most people with his diamond brightness of smile” (61). Tom is engaging, funny, and attractive precisely for his innocent observations and the creative potential they express, for example, when he claims that when he grows up he is going to be an alligator (59). Tom’s direct speech is often reported in *Love and Terror* (where Cristina’s voice is never reproduced), and it contributes an aesthetic quality to the narrative, which is animated partly by the drama of his inclusion. Tom’s difference, then, has its origin in his perpetual innocence, and that innocence is the source of his creative ability. This might be an innocence that is the true origin of all creative talent, for example “the admirable innocence of my hero George Orwell (often numbered as a possible autistic, though for his superb wit and decency I don’t know why)” (311). What the medical profession red-flags as autism therefore might be interpreted and accommodated as a form of difference that has valuable creative potential.

Ultimately then, Tom’s eccentric behavior has to be naturalized in the home and in the family, just as Cristina is naturalized as an American citizen. These are forms of difference that the text works hard to accommodate as an integral part of the contemporary domestic condition. Tom’s difference might have been a threat to domestic happiness, but Ballantine simply refuses to recognize or accept it as threatening, and it is therefore welcomed as a natural and integral part of an unsentimentalized domestic harmony. Tom’s behavior is no different from that of his father, nor his creative role models (Capote, Orwell) whose success consists partly of preserving innocence into adulthood as a vital part of creative identity. In terms of an understanding of the contemporary gothic, the accommodation of difference in the home (the integration of the symbolically monstrous other) is a way to acknowledge alterity, to see its creative merits and the invaluable contribution that it can make to the community: “When you read as much as I have about autism, everyone after a while begins



to look autistic, everyone fits somewhere along ‘the spectrum’” (191). Eccentric behavior is merely an exaggerated form of individuality, of others’ unique qualities, and recognizing this permits alterity to be naturalized and accommodated in ways that re-fashion the home and the community in terms of a politics of social inclusion that can ameliorate “the monstrosity of singularity” as fearful or threatening.

The wider community of Chadron is an extension of the conceptual concerns of home. Where Ballantine is constituting himself as a citizen through the fastidious construction of home, the contemporary western US is forging a progressive history in the wilderness “on the howling plains of nowhere”. Both central aspects of the narrative are characterized by epistemological failure: where the medical profession cannot provide a scientific rationale for Tom’s behavior, the law in Chadron is utterly defeated by the unfamiliar circumstances of Steven’s death. The authoritative discourses of medicine and law cannot provide satisfactory explanations, and this intensifies the pressure on Ballantine’s resources. The town of Chadron cannot be policed definitively because the epistemological forms of rational organization cannot cope with unfamiliar experience, and this makes all knowledge fragile and precarious. Indeed, the entire town is almost obliterated at the outset of *Love and Terror* by an apocalyptic firestorm in which individuals and community face extinction, a fire characterized by “the voracious crunching sound it made as it poured over the hills. We could hear it the way a damsel tied to a railroad track hears an oncoming locomotive ... We were fairly sure the town would burn to the ground” (75).

Like the mutable boundaries of individual subjectivity at home, the town of Chadron is not a fixed and knowable constituency but one that people move in and out of frequently. The west is by nature peripatetic, “‘This is an itinerant town’”, says sheriff Conaghan (105), and itinerancy makes social boundaries susceptible to abrupt change. It is possible that Steven was killed by a stranger passing through, “‘maybe somebody picked him up and gave him a

ride. He just didn't know who it was until it was too late'" (274). Ballantine attracts suspicion because he was himself a stranger: "'How did you end up here?' The question wherever I go" (26). Like Carwin, the dubious character from *Wieland*, Ballantine is a wanderer, and his rootlessness is perceived as potentially dangerous because his origins are unknown. Freedom of movement is a western characteristic, making the community permeable and infecting it with gothic potential: what unknown history might a stranger import? Stable communal boundaries are open to transgression; the mythology of the west encourages and facilitates movement as part of the belief in the efficacy of autonomous self-fashioning, but itinerancy can also be a fearful dead end, and *The Man Without a Past* is also one with an uncertain future (189).

The term "spectrum" was invoked in relation to Tom, and it might be extended to the wider community of the contemporary west, to imply a variability of terms. Individual subjectivity and the social boundaries of citizenship are not confined by a specific and known set of values. Where Ballantine meets the challenges of constructing home, the police marshal the lawlessness of the town. But here, the police are characterized by failure in the face of circumstances beyond their experience, and they become "tragic burlesque figures shrugging with upturned palms" (141). The narrative's running sub-text, "Police Beat", becomes a punning comic commentary on the precincts of authority, and there are conflicts of jurisdiction at the limits of their knowledge. But their failure is principally attributed to the problem of the historical origin. When Steven is first reported missing, the police refrain from searching because they do not know where to begin: "Officials didn't conduct a search because they didn't know where to start? ... the beginning is a very good place to start" (244). Ballantine's palpable frustration comes from the knowledge that the narrative of detection is doomed because it cannot identify a point of origin, and this paralyzes any historical account of Steven's disappearance that might have ensued. This teleological

impasse is part of the wider conceptual investigation of origins, and a further example of the vital importance of understanding the origin as the crucial source of historical enquiry, and of how the lack of such knowledge contributes to the formation of a gothic narrative.

Although the gothic is difficult to define, critics are agreed upon its hybridity, that is to say, gothic texts are often constituted of a variety of simultaneous textual discourses, “cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries” (Goddu 5), or “a Frankenstein’s monster, assembled out of bits and pieces of the past” (Kilgour 3-4). Jacqueline Howard interprets this as a positive aspect of the politics of gothic, a form of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, “in which the propensity for multiple discourses is highly developed” (16). *Love and Terror* is notable for its multiple generic affiliations: memoir, detective fiction, true crime novel, campus novel, a form of contemporary western. At one point Ballantine depicts himself “exhausting all the potential ghost, cook-book, crime, autism, and cartoon possibilities of Chadron” (89). It is a text composed partly of other documents and voices, and held together by its own vigilant self-examination; a text whose title recalls Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Fiedler’s *Love and Death in The American Novel*, and which is haunted by significant textual revenants such as *Exit the Rainmaker* and *The Stranger Beside Me*.

In this respect it is important to recognize the proper value of the metafictional aspect of *Love and Terror*, a narrative partly about the creation of the narrative we are reading, and one that is deeply self-conscious about the processes of its own composition in particular ways. The inclusion of comments such as “‘When are you going to put me in one of your books?’” (198) is more than simply humorous self-reference. Ballantine’s use of metafiction is not simply a sterile postmodern playfulness, but an awareness of the social politics of narrative and its ethical responsibilities. For example, declarations such as “I’m in my fifth year of working on this book and have made \$1000 so far” (139), demonstrate an awareness of the

market for true crime and an eagerness to distance himself from it. Initially, the metafictional dimension is concerned with the search for a viable commercial subject, in order to make art work, and to support a new family. But once the subject is discovered, the metafictional self-examination shifts to the ethical issues of writing about Steven's death in ways that are more than simply "an exploitation of another's misery" (139). The immediate social consequences of authorship are dramatized as a way to consider important ethical issues about the responsibilities of writing. This metafictional narrative is a story of critical self-examination that demonstrates a vigilant sensitivity to the commercial appetite for sensationalism, and a desire to create a text that does not succumb to it.

The metafictional narrative of *Love and Terror* is also a vital means for the representation of the self to sustain itself. Where the origin of the text is constituted principally by a palimpsest of antecedent textual traces, the intensity of the metafictional narrative is indicative of an anxiety about producing the self in writing, and so, writing about writing becomes an important means of self-authentication. The metafictional aspect of *Love and Terror* is therefore an extension of the problem of the origin, of creating a self ab initio from its own textual processes in order to ward off the (gothic) fear of disappearance. This is a performance of the self that needs to be commensurate to its fear of disappearance, and metafictional self-examination is integral to that performance. Where domesticity is depicted as (house) work, writing is aesthetic and economic work, under the same ideological auspices as William Carlos Williams' "I must make something of myself" ("Pastoral"). In *Love and Terror*, writing is a performance of Ballantine's organizing consciousness that pulls all the evidence together, and metafiction is its own discourse of the performing self.

So far, the arguments of this paper have postponed an interpretation of Steven's death, so that it can be brought more quickly into sharp focus. Steven is a further representation of ideas about history, of the fate of the deracinated subject who finds not fulfilment in mobility

but only a grim and brutal end. Steven is a symbolic representation of what might have become of Ballantine if he had not committed to a settled domestic life and invested it with hopes of redemption. Ballantine's eagerness to act as a detective is both an expression of the desire to know the self, and, simultaneously, a frustrated expression of the impossibility of knowing the self. Steven enters the text at chapter thirteen only once the domestic narrative has been first established, because his symbolic function is to challenge it and to disturb its enlightened premises. Ballantine's speculations about Steven are therefore covert narcissistic examinations of his own predicament: "His story in many ways felt like my own" (96).

Steven's historical origins are not properly established because they are beyond the limit of Ballantine's knowledge except for inconclusive traces. The true origin (Steven's exact circumstances) cannot be known, and this is the real source of fear: what was the beginning of that fateful night, in terms of emotional distress (if it was suicide), or an unknown violent encounter (if it was murder). Ballantine follows what he believes was Steven's route, re-tracing his footsteps like the true double-walker that he is, the only person to take particular interest in Steven's movements (the wanderer who wants to know the truth by discovering the origin of wandering), and who characterizes Steven as going in-between: "I'm convinced his purpose was furtive that night" (271), and, "He was obviously restless that night, roaming all over town" (279). Ballantine interprets Steven as experiencing a worrying indeterminacy, his unknown movements analogous to the dynamic mutability of individual subjectivity and civic community, each in the process of becoming something else, each committed to a faith in futurity which is as uncertain as the past.

Ballantine returns repeatedly to the scene where Steven's body was discovered, a repetition that expresses a compulsion to know that cannot be satisfied, only obsessively repeated as in a baulked act of mourning. He gets access to the autopsy images: "As I study these photographs, I find myself saying over and over again 'I'm so sorry, Steve. I am so

sorry they did this to you” (305), and he searches for a point of original knowledge by placing himself in physical proximity to the site of the death, his bewildered incomprehension compulsively revisited: “I’ve gone back out to the site on numerous winter nights trying to figure out what might have happened ... it’s easy to get lost or turned around” (306). On one occasion, he takes Tom to this place. Apart from the literal expedient of child-minding, this is a symbolic bringing together of the progressive narrative and the gothic history. Here, Ballantine’s enlightened determination to accommodate Tom’s difference as a positive creative agency is juxtaposed with the gothic narrative of horror, of difference’s total abjection. Tom recognizes this place’s awfulness, his innocence speaking eloquently of a horror beyond his comprehension: “Tom did not know why we were here. I didn’t try to explain. ‘The air smells very *difficult* here’, he said” (235). Ballantine is speechless, and he offers Tom’s innocent perception the chance to articulate, in a unique creative fashion, the corruption and degradation of what happened here.

In accordance with the text’s gothic credentials, there is inevitably some focus on the horrors of the damaged body, on its grotesque deterioration, “incinerated beyond recognition” (274). The mouse infestation in the chest cavity, for example, is a particularly gothic moment (211). In this respect, it is worth noting what we might term the aestheticization of Steven’s body, that is to say, the text’s artful composition of it into a spectacle of language that is arresting and uncomfortably memorable. This is perhaps necessary, to bring home to the reader the true horror of Steven’s death, but, at the same time, it involves some creative contrivances that are carried out with a lyrical intensity that makes an aesthetic artefact of abjection. Thus, Steven’s body becomes “a decadent heap sprawled below in the weeds”, which looked more like “a charcoal Gumby or a tackling dummy” (206); it is “a grotesque sculpture of perpetual anguish” (211), and a “black, ransacked mass straining against the slackness of its ligatures” (210), and finally a place where Ballantine imagines Steven

attending to “the ghastly crackling fat-spattering roar of his own incineration” (279). These are further demonstrations of the artful narrator at work, producing something artistic from horror, generating that (perverse) pleasure in language which is art’s prerogative. The aestheticization of Steven’s body is evidence of the redemptive potential of art, or, more precisely, proof of the redemptive potential of the work that goes into the production of art. To conjure a compelling linguistic text from abjection exonerates a faith in what might be termed the *work* of art.

Steven’s body is a site of violent traumatic alterity, it is the most extreme expression of the forms of difference that Ballantine finds at home, the making manifest of all his worst fears, not simply that he might have once suffered the same fate, but that Steven’s abjection is the symbolic cost of the pursuit of happiness that he is currently enjoying. The compulsive return to the site is principally evidence of Ballantine’s tacit understanding of the significance of Steven’s death and debasement to his own daily life, the repetition of this scene revealing a compulsive need to know the very worst possible ‘other’ on which his life is founded. Steven’s body therefore symbolizes the awful terror of the limits of his power to know, to defeat the powers of darkness by dint of rational explication, of simple work. The repetition and the obsessive focus and compulsive return articulate the seductive power of the limits of knowledge, and he is drawn to it because of a compelling (if paradoxical) coalescence of attraction and repulsion, the twin cornerstones of the uncanny. Ballantine can never know what Steven knew, which is a way to say that he can never know himself, or, more properly, never come to a full understanding of his own history. Steven takes history away with him, and at some level this is unforgivable, unspeakable, because it is the knowledge of the historical origin that Ballantine has himself repudiated. Ballantine knows this, and his secret shame consists of concealing it in the body of Steven. It is no wonder this is powerful, it is a perverse pleasure in surviving by proxy. When Ballantine contemplates the body “trussed and

charred in a ravine”, his thoughts turn immediately to “the duty I had to the two in my care” (263), and his urgent attitude to his family, “I wanted this, us, to work out ... it was time to commit to flesh and blood” (97), reminds us of the corporeality of Steven’s body, and to the ways in which it acts as a symbolic gothic complement to those bodies at home which help constitute the narrator’s new history.

It is small consolation then, at the story’s end, when the gang from Montana robs a casino at gunpoint and flees in the direction of Nebraska, they are quickly apprehended and danger is averted, “rounded up in swift and inspiring fashion” (309). The policing of borders is briefly reassuring. But this is a text that cannot have a resolution in the conventional sense, not simply because Steven’s death is never properly understood, but because the narrative is necessarily a work in progress. Without a satisfying origin, Ballantine (and by extension the community in the wilderness), is committed to a faith in becoming, to investments in futurity, a project that might still be better one day, just a little further down the road. There can be no conclusion to this project because it is an open-ended historiographical document dedicated to a state of being that is yet to come. The symbolic re-birth that American mythology offers, “Enter America, become reborn” (43), involves a corresponding death and a repudiation of history. Hawthorne’s Wakefield, then Rip van Winkle and Gatsby, are all American men who in their different ways are complicit in, or guilty of, this dissociation, and one tradition of criticism would place them at the center of a quintessentially American canon.

Therefore, although it is likely to attract some attention due to its sensational subject matter (fuelled perhaps by Dave Jannetta’s 2014 documentary film of Ballantine’s book), this exclusively ‘non-fiction’ approach to *Love and Terror* inhibits appreciation of the work’s significant literary affiliations “along the cattle trails and barbed-wire ridges of Willa Cather consciousness” (33). Home-making in this particular place is dependent upon a commitment to work, as part of the project that ends in salvation, and the authentic source of which is a



preoccupation with original sin. *Love and Terror* is a contemporary “memoir” that offers a critique of the ideological premises of Protestantism on which the dominant American mythology is founded. In particular it is an examination of the limitations of the Protestant work ethic that has been given expression in canonical texts such as Ben Franklin’s ‘memoir’ or *Autobiography*. This work ethic has its own origins in the English Reformation, and especially in Calvinism, and is motivated partly by a sense of dialectic that is integral to the conceptual premises of Ballantine’s book, the very terms of which, love and terror, epitomize the twin conditions of its making. As David Mogen argued, “the theme of metamorphosis which continues to inform frontier mythology derives from the paradoxical symbols with which the Puritans defined their mission” (95).

If we recognize *Love and Terror* as a critical engagement with Protestantism, and the forms of religious schism at its origin, then perhaps it is not surprising that the book finally turns towards Catholicism as a means to resolve the challenges it has struggled with from the beginning. Ballantine looks forward to communion as a consolation, because it “covers everything you need to know (but were afraid to ask) from the beginning to eternity” (292), that is to say, knowledge and absolution through Catholic sacraments is a welcome resolution “from the beginning” that mere work cannot provide. In this respect, by way of a conclusion it is worth returning to the very beginning of Ballantine’s work, with the epigraph to his first novel *God Clobbers Us All*, which is a quotation from Corinthians: “Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed”, a preoccupation with personal transformation that has been there from the beginning, in Ballantine, as it is in the Bible.

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